



**State of the County Address
Milwaukee County Executive Scott Walker
Tuesday, January 29, 2008**

Today, I am proud to be at the HOPE Christian Schools. These schools embody the kind of hope I see for the future of Milwaukee County.

Over the years, it has been my pleasure to be here for groundbreaking, ribbon cuttings and check presentations. I've heard choirs and speakers and even been part of a food tasting here. It's when I see the impact on the young people here of a quality education, however, that sparks my greatest amount of hope for the future.

These students will be the leaders of our community and our county, and the fact that they are doing so well is a positive sign for the future. I have great hope because of them. Thank you for hosting me here this morning.

All too often we hear about negative news in our community. Sometimes it is about our schools and other times it might be about some of the challenges we face in this city, this county and this state. These challenges are real. Today, however, I want to start by reporting on some of the positive news in our county. These are the things that give me hope for the future.

A year ago, we saw \$1.1 billion worth of new construction in Milwaukee County and this should be another banner year. In 2007, our airport broke the all time record with over 7.7 million passengers and readers of a national travel magazine ranked Mitchell as the 4th best airport in the country. These are all good signs for our economy.

Last year, we again gave the Sheriff the resources needed to occupy the lakefront. As predicted, the beaches were safe because of that presence. Then, working with Masterlock, we obtained more than a thousand gunlocks to hand out to the public with the Sheriff and our firearm intervention program for young offenders continues to be a success.

'AARP: The Magazine' did a story on five great places to live and listed Milwaukee as one of them – in no small part due to our Department on Aging. Our FamilyCare program served some 7,500 older adults with long-term care needs and still generated a surplus. And our nutrition program provided more than 463,000 delicious meals (I know because I have eaten at nearly every site) in 2007.

Last year, we hosted Operation Freedom again at the zoo - this time with the Military Order of the Purple Heart. Some 17,000 military personnel, their families and veterans joined us for the tribute. Our veterans' office continues to see more vets since our move to the VA. We joined with others to advocate for the preservation of the historic buildings on the VA grounds as well as the continued use of that area to serve the needs of our veterans.

During the National Veterans Wheelchair Games, we hosted events at a number of our parks and at the zoo and we converted several of our buses so we could transport participants. All of these activities, plus the work of countless veterans and their supporters, earned Milwaukee the distinction of the most patriotic city.

And 2007 marked the 100th anniversary of the parks system. We had 100 free concerts, planted 100 trees, gave away a motorcycle thanks to Harley-Davidson, had a 100th anniversary bash at Washington Park, and shot off fireworks at Red Arrow Park on New Year's Eve.

A couple of years ago, the headlines shouted out bad news about the Milwaukee Public Museum. County Board Chairman Lee Holloway and I stepped up and appointed a financial oversight panel and took control. Our team then worked with a recovery committee to put things back into place.

Full payment of the loans that were guaranteed by the county will be paid off by March 31st of this year. I want to thank Valerie Daniels-Carter, Mike Falbo, Mike Grebe, Jennifer Noyes and Carol Skornicka – as well as Mary Meehan and the members of the recovery panel – and Dan Finley and the museum staff for their amazing work. We stuck our necks out to protect the museum and it paid off.

At the zoo, we completed a \$30 million capital campaign with the Zoological Society of Milwaukee. The US Bank Gathering Place will open this spring and the flamingos will return to the zoo with a new home.

Overall, plenty of good things took place during the past year. It gives me hope for the future of Milwaukee County.

Still, we also have some significant challenges.

Recent statistics from the FBI show that violent crime continues to rise in the City of Milwaukee. This is unacceptable for the city, for the county and for this entire region.

If people don't feel safe in their homes, at work or in their neighborhoods, nothing else matters. Public safety is my number one priority because it trumps all other issues.

Historically, the county has not played a direct role in public safety, but times are changing. We must work with local police departments and the Sheriff to fight crime.

Our 2008 budget includes support for the Sheriff's Targeted Enforcement Unit that will continue patrols on the lakefront and expand coverage to our parks and other key areas across the county. We just transferred funding for new vehicles for that unit.

We will also work with the Community Justice Council to implement a program to replace the old system of checking in Huber offenders at night with a new GPS system that will track them every hour of every day. Once a judge sentences someone to work release, we need to know where he or she is 24/7.

In 2008, we will also work to implement a program to involve more churches and other faith-based organizations with young people in the juvenile justice system. They need support to keep them out of trouble.

While juveniles who are not a public safety threat can be connected to people within the community, those who commit serious crimes must continue to be waived into adult court. State legislation that would raise the age in adult court from 17 to 18 would be a serious blow to fighting crime and it could cost our county (at least) \$23 million. I will lobby against this legislation in 2008.

I know that those who live in poverty are not predestined to a life of crime, but I also know that those who live in high crime areas are too often imprisoned by the poverty that follows a wave of crime. We must work to end crime and we must work to end poverty. I look forward to working with the Sheriff, the new chief in Milwaukee and others to make our community safe once again.

Having a low crime rate is one way to improve our neighborhoods. Having more people living in their own homes is another.

Unfortunately, 2007 was a record year for foreclosures. While there were foreclosures in every community in the county, 87% were in the City of Milwaukee and most were in the poorest neighborhoods. Lowering property taxes is a key strategy to keep more people living in their own homes. When folks are working paycheck to paycheck, every penny counts.

And lowering property taxes is an important way to keep jobs in the county. With major players like the Miller Brewing Company making key corporate decisions based on the cost of doing business here, we need to show that we can compete with other parts of the country.

I made a commitment to hold down taxes. For six straight budgets, my proposals have not raised the tax levy from the previous year. I commit to doing that again.

And even though the members of the County Board and I sometimes differ on the size of the tax levy, we have changed the terms of the debate. When I arrived, budgets were increasing almost 6% per year. Now, even with the increases enacted by the County Board, the annual increase in the tax levy is just a little over 2%.

That is progress and it gives me hope that we can do even more to control costs and lower taxes in the future.

While we are working to make things more affordable, we are also restoring pride in our county. Quality services and financial responsibility can still go hand-in-hand.

Unfortunately, too many people cling to the status quo notion that says government must either dramatically raise taxes or cut services. I say that is a false choice.

Many of our people and our businesses cannot afford higher taxes. Yet so many of our programs are vital to our quality of life. We should demand greater innovation from our government to balance the two concerns.

As an example, I will seek to increase the hours of work in the park system by using seasonal employees for entry-level work and will seek to expand the number of public/private partnerships like the Starbucks in Red Arrow Park.

In addition, there will be plenty of improvements in the parks system in 2008. Soon, we will break ground on the David F. Schulz Aquatic Center at Lincoln Park, which will be a major water destination on the north end of the county. We also hope to help the Friends of Hoyt Park Pool finish off a major capital campaign for a new aquatic center.

The Domes will receive a major facelift after four decades of service, the Oak Leaf Trail will continue to grow and new splash pads will go into place at several parks.

In the area of human services, a major move for us in '08 will be to formalize plans to move the mental health complex to the former St. Michael's Hospital site. Currently, we are working with the leadership of the County Board to prepare a plan that best meets the needs of the county and the people we serve.

Along with caring for more older adults, we hope to expand FamilyCare to people with developmental and physical disabilities and will work with the state to make that a reality. And now that we established a permanent commission with the City of Milwaukee, we will work to add more housing options for people with special needs throughout the community.

In addition to housing, we want to create an environment for more job growth. In 2008, we will push to build the UWM School of Engineering on the county grounds and to preserve the Eschweiler Buildings as part of that project. The Milwaukee Regional Medical Center is a major economic engine for this region and building the new school there will be like pouring jet fuel into that engine.

We are also moving forward with major projects on the Park East corridor. Working with our neighbors at the Bradley Center, the Brewery, Manpower and others, this will continue to be a growing and exciting part of our county. So far, our projects will add \$300 million worth of new value to the county and we are far from being finished.

Our airport is another economic giant. To avoid the problems seen at O'Hare, we will move forward on a plan to build another major runway and additional concourses at the airport. This plan comes from a great deal of work with the neighborhoods surrounding the airport, the business community and with the airlines and other stakeholders. This is a plan that inspires hope for our county and our region.

I will also push forward with a regional plan on other forms of transportation. But instead of looking at regionalization as an excuse to raise taxes, I see it as a way to consolidate costs and to move workers from one part of the region to another.

I want this region to move forward with a way to dramatically improve the transit system. Our Bus Rapid Transit plan will connect people with an exciting new system of hybrid buses. Used successfully in nearly 20 other urban areas, this technology can reduce travel times, increase riders and improve environmental conditions – all at a fraction of the cost of fixed rail. I hope that we can move forward and build a consensus around this plan in 2008.

And we will continue to restore pride in our county by strengthening the ethics code, creating an Internet based system to increase the transparency of government and blocking an increase in pension or payroll benefits. It is about time that everyone realize that government is here to serve the people and not the other way around.

On the lighter side, 2008 will mark the 5th year I travel the state and neighboring states on a Road King to promote Milwaukee area attractions. Last year, we made 65 media stops in four different states.

Soon after this year's ride, the Harley-Davidson Museum will open. Then, the 105th anniversary celebration will be held at Veteran's Park in August. I can't wait.

Finally, we owe it to the taxpayers to keep an open mind to ideas that can save money and provide better services. It has worked well in the past, and now we should be more aggressive in our efforts. This is how we build true hope for our future.

Some changes come fast. Others take time. For those who might be discouraged with the pace of change in county government, I share your angst. At the same time, I remind us all about how long it took to dismantle the parking structure that once sat above the expressway.

After years of negotiations and debate, we finally took the annex parking structure down a year ago. Today, everyone who goes through the Marquette Interchange has a spectacular view of the courthouse.

In the same way, I know that we live in a great county. In fact, I know that there is a great county government here with many, many outstanding people working in it. For too many years, however, the scandals prevented the rest of us from seeing the good that is within.

Working together, I am certain that we can reveal that greatness once again. But hope without a plan is just a dream. I believe in the people of our county. With a positive agenda, like the one we outlined here today, we can make that dream a reality.